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Superfund: A needed first step

Last week's report that the Sankary Landfill, Inc. site in Cranston was cited in 1976 by federal authorities as being the third largest known dumping ground for PCBs and other chemical waste, is "a shocker" says Sen. John H. Chafee.

The "whole purpose" of the superfund bill being considered by Congress "is to help in situations" like cleaning up such dumping areas, he said, and, "More importantly, to help prevent (such sites) in the future."

The superfund bill, which the senator has been working on with colleagues for two years, would provide funds for cleaning up existing sites and future spills of any kind by levying fees on chemical companies.

It has been reported out of the Senate's environmental and public works committee to the floor and is expected to be discussed this week.

"I think toxic waste is (one of the most) serious problems the country faces, and I'm going to push hard for it (superfund)" Chafee says. "It's extremely important."

"The administration is pushing it. Environmentalists are pushing it," he says, admitting that the bill has about "40 percent" chance of passage.

Following is an article sent to the Herald office by Chafee just about the time John Monahan's story on Sankary Landfill appeared last Wednesday.—Editor

By Sen. John H. Chafee

Our country's water and air have become cleaner because of our fierce determination to protect the environment. We must now direct this same determination to cleaning up the hazardous waste sites that endanger hundreds of communities, including some in Rhode Island.

The irresponsible, reckless dumping and spilling of hazardous substances threaten the health, water, land and homes of Americans all across the country. The clean-up and containment of these substances is the most important environmental problem of the balance of the century.

The Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) has estimated that there are from between 1,200 and 34,000 hazardous waste dumps across the country that pose "significant problems." In our state alone, Rhode Islanders are living with serious toxic waste dumps at the Picillo farm in Coventry, the Western Sand and Gravel site in Burrillville, the Davis landfill in Smithfield, and the Landfill and Resource Recovery site in North Smithfield.

Most horrifying of this country's waste sites is the Love Canal chemical dump in New York. More than 30 years ago, a chemical company dumped 22,000 tons of toxic wastes in this abandoned canal in Niagara Falls and covered it over. The wastes seeped into groundwater, soil, trees and food grown in the dirt.

Only too late, Love Canal residents realized the effects of this chemical dumping. They reported abnormally high rates of miscarriages, birth defects, nervous breakdowns and respiratory problems. Today, those families have been evacuated from their homes and probably will never be able to return.

Just how many of the chemical dumps in this country are as serious a problem as Love Canal is a mystery. Just as big a mystery is the full scope of short and long-term health effects on the residents of the communities in which these sites are found.

Here is the true tragedy of the hazardous waste problem: People don't know how the wastes will affect their future health and that of their children. And they fear the worst.

Two actions are necessary to start solving these mysteries. First, throughout clean-up of existing hazardous waste sites and fast response to chemical spills must begin,

and must begin soon. Second, proper means of disposing of current and future chemical wastes must be established so that there will be no Love Canals in the decades to come.

The EPA estimates that a thorough clean-up of each "significant" hazardous waste site could cost as much as \$25 million, with the total cost of some sites running into the billions of dollars when no responsible parties can be found to pay for the clean-up.

When one considers the number of hazardous waste sites thought to be contaminating this country, the cleanup costs become astronomical.

A vital first step is the establishment of a "superfund"—a general federally operated fund which would finance the clean-up of toxic waste dumping grounds and chemical spills. This step must be taken by Congress, which is now in the process of passing legislation to set up the fund.

According to a bill which has passed the Senate Environment and Public Works Committee and now awaits full Senate consideration, the superfund would call for a mix of fees on the chemical industry and general federal revenues. It could amount to more than \$1 billion three years from now, and would be maintained at a yearly level of \$800 million.

The superfund would cover hazardous substances spills into air, land, water and groundwater, and releases from hazardous waste sites. It would also cover individual injury to health, loss of income due to personal injury, medical expenses due to personal injury, loss of property and damages to natural resources.

Industry fees into the fund would be placed on inorganic materials, oil, and chemicals that go into producing hazardous wastes. In any one year, two-thirds of the fund could be used for treatment and clean-up of spills, and one-third could be used to compensate victims of the releases.

As now conceived, the superfund eventually will provide money for testing, monitoring, cleaning up and containing wastes at sites such as those in Rhode Island.

It is imperative that Congress act quickly on this legislation. There is no time for bureaucratic procrastination when the cancer rate soars in the areas surrounding some of these waste sites in the country, and townspeople in communities such as Forestdale and Smithfield learn that their water has been contaminated.